

**Testimony of Kate Coventry, Senior Policy Analyst
at the Board of Zoning Adjustment Hearing on
Case Number 19452, 1700 Rhode Island Avenue NE
March 1, 2017**

Chairperson Hill and other members of the Board of Zoning Adjustment, thank you for the opportunity to testify today. My name is Kate Coventry and I am a senior policy analyst at the DC Fiscal Policy Institute. DCFPI promotes budget and policy choices to expand economic opportunity and reduce income inequality in the District of Columbia, through independent research and policy recommendations. I am also a voting member of the DC Interagency Council on Homelessness and was an appointed member of the Design Principles Committee, the committee tasked with providing recommendations on design guidelines for replacement units for the DC General Family Shelter. I am also a Ward 5 resident who lives in Bloomingdale.

I am here to discuss why DC General Family Shelter needs to be replaced, the recommendations of the Design Principles Committee, and to urge the Board of Zoning Adjustment to approve the zoning relief sought by the District of Columbia so that the DC General Family Shelter can be closed as quickly as possible.

DC General was never intended to be a family shelter. The former hospital became a shelter after deplorable conditions and abusive staff behavior led to the abrupt closure of the DC Village Family Shelter. The District needed a place to shelter homeless families until families could secure permanent housing and began placing families in DC General, a building that had been unused since the hospital's closure in 2001. The building's age and years of disuse result in frequent elevator and heat outages, regular pest infestations, poor air quality, and other bad conditions. Additionally, the building is too big to manage effectively. With as many as 260 families sheltered there, staff are unable to know all residents so all residents, including children, have to go through metal detectors to enter the building. The building also lacks sufficient space for services. The Homeless Children's Playtime Project regularly has to turn away children for lack of space.

At the request of the Mayor, the DC Interagency Council on Homelessness convened a Design Principles Committee to provide recommendations on replacement shelter. This Committee considered costs, the needs of families, and research on trauma-informed building design. We could not find much research on shelters specifically as most jurisdictions do not have a right to shelter law and most shelter is provided by non-profit organizations. These organizations often have limited budgets and are limited to whatever building they can afford or are donated to them.

Providing family shelter is incredibly expensive. Families need private space to maintain family routines, requiring more space than single adult shelters. Family shelters also require a good number of 24-hour security guards given the transience of families. Shelters are only a temporary stop for families while they are looking for permanent housing so there is a good amount of turnover requiring extra security as families cannot know their neighbors as they would in an apartment

building. Additionally, in 2016, 19.6 percent of homeless parents in shelter reported they have experienced domestic violence,¹ and even this is likely to reflect gross under-reporting. The National Coalition Against Domestic Violence reports that domestic violence is one of the most chronically underreported crimes. Only 25 percent of all physical assaults, 20 percent of all rapes, and 50 percent of all stalking perpetrated against females by their partners are reported to the police.² Intensive security is required so these parents can feel safer. Finally, families require more intensive case management than single adults as case managers need to help parents meet their children's needs, such as making sure the children are enrolled in health insurance.

Given these costs, the Committee believed that shelters of approximately 50 families were a balance of achieving economies of scale to make the cost per family sheltered reasonable while ensuring the District did not recreate the warehouse nature of DC General. Part of that balance was limiting each floor to 10 families to ensure that families were interacting most frequently with a smaller number of families.

Additionally, the Committee prioritized flexible services space and private office space to offer confidential case management services to ensure that the multiple services that families need could be provided.

I urge the Board of Zoning Adjustment to approve the zoning relief the District is asking for and to ensure that the closure of DC General is not delayed. The DC General Family Shelter cannot meet the needs of the residents and is not a suitable place to shelter anyone, particularly families with children.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify and I am happy to answer any questions.

¹ Hypothermia FY16 Debrief – Families. Prepared for the DC Interagency Council on Homelessness by The Community Partnership for the Prevention of Homelessness. May 2016

² Domestic Violence National Statistics. National Coalition Against Domestic Violence. 2015. Retrieved from www.ncadv.org